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## **Winter Playbook for Nursing Homes and Other Long-term Care Facilities to Manage COVID-19 and Protect Residents, Staff, and Visitors**

While COVID-19 is no longer the disruptive force it once was, real challenges persist, particularly for older Americans, who suffer from serious illness or deaths from COVID-19 at higher rates than the rest of the population.

Seniors continue to have the highest risk of being hospitalized and dying because of COVID-19. In fact, over the past two months, nearly 90 percent of COVID-19 deaths nationwide have occurred among individuals age 65 and older, with 70 percent occurring among those age 75 and older. Each week, around 2,000 seniors are dying from COVID-19. We know that people living in congregate care settings are also at high risk, as 1 in 5 recent COVID-19 deaths were in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities, such as assisted-living facilities.

This toll is heartbreaking and unacceptable, particularly as we now have updated COVID-19 vaccines and treatments that can – along with other strategies such as improving indoor air quality – can help prevent COVID-19 deaths.

Nursing home and other long-term care facility leaders have a responsibility – and in some cases, an obligation – to step up and take action to protect their residents from COVID-19 – a responsibility that is even more acute ahead of further potential increases in cases and hospitalizations this winter.

As expected, COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations are rising in many parts of the U.S. following the Thanksgiving holiday, including in nursing homes and other congregate settings. In some parts of the country, hospitalization rates for people 70 years and older are at their highest levels since the Omicron BA.1 surge last winter. This increased circulation of the virus is likely to continue during the winter, a time when Americans gather together indoors with loved ones and respiratory viruses like COVID-19 and the flu spread more quickly.

Through widely available vaccines, treatments, and tests, as well as layered prevention strategies like improved indoor air quality and making masks available to visitors, long-term care facilities can reduce serious illness, prevent hospitalizations and deaths, and minimize disruptions for their communities.

Failure to take action will mean more Americans will needlessly suffer the immeasurable loss of a loved one this holiday season. Some long-term care facilities and their staff are already leading the charge on implementing these tools to protect residents, with high rates of residents up-to-date on COVID-19 vaccination, timely use of treatments, and thoughtful prevention measures like improving indoor air quality. That work is saving lives.

To that end, the Administration is calling on all long-term care facility leaders to step up this winter:

## **1. Help residents and staff access updated COVID-19 vaccines.**

We have updated COVID-19 vaccines that target the versions of COVID-19 we are facing now. As of December 4, just 42 percent of nursing home residents and 10 percent of nursing home staff have gotten an updated COVID-19 vaccine – putting tens of thousands of Americans at higher risk of serious illness or worse from COVID-19. Offering COVID-19 vaccinations to residents and staff and educating about their benefits is a requirement by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) for nursing homes, and other long-term care facility settings can act to help their communities get the updated vaccine.

- ✓ Offer vaccinations for residents and staff throughout the winter. Partner with a vaccine provider to host on-site vaccination clinics for your facilities, including vaccination clinics that offer both the annual flu shot and updated COVID-19 vaccine. Consider options to reach staff who work overnight and weekend hours.
- ✓ For skilled nursing facilities, leverage new flexibilities to have staff administer COVID-19 vaccines this winter. Take advantage of newly available single-dose vials with these new temporary flexibilities available to skilled nursing facilities to have vaccine doses available on site so residents can get a COVID-19 vaccination when they want one.
- ✓ Disseminate clear information to your residents and staff regularly throughout the winter on the importance of getting the updated COVID-19 vaccine, as well as the annual flu shot. Follow up with residents who have not yet received an updated vaccine—as well as their family members, reminding them that immunity wanes over time and the updated shot will give them added protection.
- ✓ Host in-person or virtual events and activities to help answer resident and staff questions on COVID-19 vaccination. You can work in partnership with Quality Improvement Organizations as a resource.
- ✓ Offer paid time off for staff vaccinations, such as what the federal government has done for its employees and their families.

## **2. Ensure that residents and staff are testing if they are symptomatic, and know how to access COVID-19 treatment options (such as oral antiviral pills) if they test positive.**

There are widely available and easily accessible COVID-19 treatments, including oral antiviral medications like Paxlovid (nirmatrelvir/ritonavir) and Lagevrio (molnupiravir), that have been shown to reduce hospitalizations and serious illness. Timely prescribing of COVID-19 antivirals is now part of high-quality care in long-term and post-acute care settings – and can save lives. Recent data encouragingly suggests the highest utilization rates of COVID-19 treatments are in long-term care facilities, but there are still many eligible residents not receiving these potentially life-saving treatments. Every facility can act to ensure its community of residents is aware of COVID-19 treatments and their effectiveness and to promote easy access to these lifesaving treatments.

- ✓ Ensure your residents and staff get tested if they have COVID-19 symptoms and your facilities are able to assess if residents are eligible for treatment options. Testing leads to treatment, and timely treatment prevents serious illness and saves lives.

- ✓ Ensure that your facility has test kits on-hand and available for residents and staff.
- ✓ Increase awareness of valuable resources, such as the millions of tests per week available for long-term care facilities to order for free from the federal government, free at-home tests that are available to residents through their health insurance, and telehealth and virtual care options for COVID-19 evaluation and treatment.
- ✓ Working with pharmacy partners, ensure your facilities have adequate supply of oral antivirals stocked to minimize treatment delays and ensure patients initiate treatment within 5 days of symptoms.
- ✓ Initiate test-to-treat programs within your nursing homes. This can include prescribing by both clinicians as well as consulting pharmacists to ensure that residents have timely access to care for COVID-19. This can also include incorporating telehealth options to ensure timely access to treatment.
- ✓ Educate your prescribing clinicians so that they feel comfortable providing treatment and reviewing [guidance](#) that provides information on how many drug-drug interactions with Paxlovid can be readily managed.

### **3. Improve indoor air quality across facilities**

Taking steps to improve air quality inside nursing homes and other congregate settings can reduce the spread of COVID-19, the flu, and other respiratory illnesses, in addition to offering other health benefits. More passive measures that require less individual behavior change, like improving indoor air quality, will help reduce the risk and spread of COVID-19 and other airborne viruses.

*Actions that improve indoor air quality in facilities that have mechanical ventilation/Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC) systems:*

- ✓ Schedule an inspection to ensure the system is operating properly and address issues found in the assessment.
- ✓ Replace air filters in mechanical ventilation systems to the highest filtration level they can accommodate, including MERV-13 filters when possible.
- ✓ Switch HVAC systems to the “on” position instead of “auto” at all occupied hours, with increased run-time and enhanced settings when COVID-19 Community Levels are higher.

*In all facilities:*

- ✓ Use portable air cleaners in areas where residents, staff, and visitors congregate, such as dining rooms, recreation rooms, and resident rooms, to supplement clean air flow. Prioritize rooms of residents who have respiratory infections or those who are immunocompromised.

- Nursing homes can purchase portable air cleaners with high-efficiency particulate air filters through the [Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' civil money penalty reinvestment program](#).
- Additional funding is available through state and local government allocations of the American Rescue Plan State and Local Fiscal Relief Program, as well as CDC's Nursing Home and Long-Term Care Facility Strike Team and Infrastructure Program and their Strengthening Healthcare Associated Infections and Antimicrobial Resistance (AR (HAI/AR) Program).
- ✓ Turn on ceiling fans to mix the air, turn on restroom and kitchen vents to move contaminated air outdoors, and use window and exhaust fans to direct the airflow out of the room when safety measures and thermal comfort allow.
- ✓ Where possible, repair or address condition of windows or doors to increase air flow as conditions permit.
- ✓ For a tailored approach, partner with an occupational and environmental health and safety professional, HVAC expert, or other indoor air quality expert to recommend additional strategies to reduce the spread of airborne illnesses and improve indoor air quality to meet individual facility needs.